

Evelyn F. Reavis. Adolescent Female Identity Development and Its Portrayal in Select Contemporary Young Adult Fiction. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. November, 2004. 40 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

This study describes a content analysis of six contemporary young adult fiction novels. Adolescence is a time of great change, particularly for girls. It is during this time that female adolescents develop their voice and identity. As literature reflects the reader's world, it also affects in part how female adolescents perceive their identity. Latent content analysis was used to code eight variables to determine if select contemporary young adult fiction novels appropriately describe the development of identity among adolescent females. All of the novels included in the study provided sufficient evidence of accurate portrayal of female adolescent identity development, by having examples of at least four out of eight variables, with most having examples of seven out of eight variables.

Headings:

Adolescence in Literature

Girls in Literature

Identity in adolescence

Teenage Girls—Books and reading

Teenage Girls—Psychology—Juvenile Literature

Young Adult Fiction, American—History and criticism

**ADOLESCENT FEMALE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN
SELECT CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT FICTION**

by

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Introduction

Adolescence is a strange time in any young adult's life, but especially for girls. "Generally puberty is defined as a biological process, while adolescence is defined as the social and personal experience of that process."ⁱ For females adolescence can be described "as a crossroads in women's development: a meeting between girl and woman."ⁱⁱ It is a time of many changes and development – physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually.ⁱⁱⁱ It is when girls become women and develop their own sense of self.

Literature Review

Puberty marks the biological start of adolescence^{iv}. "Everything is changing—body shape, hormones, skin and hair. Calmness is replaced by anxiety."^v Girls as young as eight or nine years old may face the first signs of puberty, which will last until they are approximately eighteen, as their bodies begin to release hormones such as estrogen and androgen. Around eight or nine years old estrogen causes the girl's breasts to grow, and androgen causes the growth of pubic hair. Estrogen also is the cause of menarche, which, as "the first menstrual period, is a significant event in the life cycle of an adolescent."^{vi} Over the next few years these hormones will cause the female adolescent's body to change into a "woman" as the sex organs mature, curves and hips appear on her body, and her fat to muscle ratio increases.^{vii} Lasting from about age nine to fourteen girls

experience a growth spurt that causes their legs, arms, hands, feet, and everything else to grow rapidly, often at different rates, which also causes distress to the female adolescent. Faced with so many changes in her body, the female adolescent often becomes self-conscious and may compare her own body to those of her peers.^{viii}

Cognitively the female adolescent is changing as well. In early adolescence, girls are unable to think abstractly, and thus see things concretely, especially in relation to themselves. They see things in black and white, “in” and “out”, marvelous and worthless.^{ix} At this point they are also egocentric in their thinking. “That is, they are unable to focus on anyone’s experience but their own.”^x In the process of moving to abstract thinking, adolescents can be difficult to reason with. They often overanalyze everything around them, whether it is a glance from a friend, or comment made by a parent or someone of the opposite sex. And they often carry over their overanalyzed thinking into arguments with friends or parents. For example, one might say, “I have no friends,” or “But everybody else is allowed to stay out until midnight.” Dalismer (1986) cites Freud:

I take it that it is normal for an adolescent to behave for a considerable length of time in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner; to fight his impulses and to accept them; to ward them off successfully and to be overrun by them; to love his parents and to hate them; to revolt against them and to be dependent on them; . . . to be more idealistic, artistic, generous and unselfish than he will ever be again, but also the opposite: self-centered, egoistic, calculating. Such fluctuations between extreme opposites would be deemed highly abnormal at any other time of life. At this time they may signify no more than that an adult structure of personality takes a long time to emerge, that the ego of the individual in question does not cease to experiment and is in no hurry to close down on possibilities. Anna Freud (1958)^{xi}

However, as the adolescents' cognitive thinking changes, they are able to think about things abstractly and gain an ability to think about and understand other points of view.^{xii} As adolescents learn to take in other points of view they begin to seek answers to higher-level questions, such as meaning and order regarding life, religion, and faith; and they begin to develop an understanding of morals, rights and privileges.^{xiii} The female adolescent is also likely to look for and select role models to help guide her way to make choices regarding the questions she has about life and to help her set goals. By late adolescence, the female adolescent will be able to think things through and make her own decisions.^{xiv}

As the female adolescent matures cognitively she is also working "towards a more mature sense of identity and purpose."^{xv} "According to Erikson's model, the identity 'crisis' of adolescence is part of a series of developmental transitions that begin in infancy and occur throughout a person's life," and identity can "be most easily definable through its absence or loss"^{xvi} Kroger (1996) states that adolescence is when one must define oneself. It is a time when adolescents are trying to determine who they are and who they will be in life.^{xvii} Adolescents develop their identity through their experiences, failures and successes, perceptions of how others think about them, self-perceptions, and relationships with others. They also ask themselves such probing questions as, " 'Who am I?' 'What kind of student do I want to be?' 'What things are important to me?' 'What do others expect of me?' 'Where do I want to go with my life?' 'How do other people perceive me?'"^{xviii}

Unfortunately, girls are often confused about how to develop their own voice and identity.^{xix} A major element in a girl's development of identity is also "central to the psychology of women . . . the feeling of not being listened to or heard or responded to empathically."^{xx} In trying to find their voice, "If they think someone is not listening, they will try again; and if that doesn't work, they can find creative, though perhaps disruptive ways to be heard."^{xxi} As a result of not being heard, not knowing one's identity and losing one's voice, girls are subject to psychological pitfalls. "Adolescence has been identified as a time of heightened psychological risk for girls. Girls at this time have been observed to lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, their sense of themselves and their character."^{xxii} "They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. . . . [They] become more deferential, self-critical and depressed."^{xxiii}

Part of the uncertainty in finding a voice and identity is caused by the conflicts female adolescents face, many of which seem to be opposites. Female adolescents are conflicted between their autonomous selves, the role of being feminine, and their role within society as a female adult. The world around them gives them mixed messages such as "Be beautiful, but beauty is only skin deep. Be sexy, but not sexual. Be honest, but don't hurt anyone's feelings. Be independent, but be nice. Be smart, but not so smart that you threaten boys."^{xxiv} Therefore, not only are girls' identities affected by their physical appearance, but girls learn to present the side of them that they feel others expect them to be, even if that means they have to change their identity. Girls are also conflicted with what they know and don't know, what they feel and don't feel, and whether they

should speak or remain silent. Other “opposites” that conflict the female adolescent are self versus others, people versus rules, doing nothing versus doing something, being nice versus being selfish.^{xxv} Often girls will stop pleasing themselves and try to please others as they “discover that it is impossible to be both feminine and adult.” They find it hard to be passive and active, illogical and logical, dependent and independent, all at the same time. Thus, too often, “Girls become fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions. They are sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive, superficial and idealistic. . . . Girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers, or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable. Most girls choose to be socially acceptable and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public they become who they are supposed to be.”^{xxvi}

As the female adolescent develops her identity, she does so partly through her relationships with others. She may question authority or feel a need to separate herself from her parents. Adolescence is a time when adolescents will isolate themselves from their parents in an effort to create an independent identity.^{xxvii} “It’s partly cultural. In America we define adulthood as a moving away from families.”^{xxviii} As a result, adolescent girls often turn to their peers, who are experiencing the same changes and conflicts as themselves. They find that though they may be unable to talk with their parents, they can easily communicate with their peers.^{xxix} “As adolescents pull away from parents in search of their own identity, the peer group takes on a special significance. It may become a ‘safe’ haven, in which the adolescent can test new ideas and compare his or her own physical and psychological growth.”^{xxx}

Literature and the way females are portrayed in literature reflect the world of readers, and thus impacts the way females identify with themselves.^{xxx} Town (2004) argues that over the past three decades writers have created adolescent female characters who counter traditional thinking about expectations of the adolescent girl, their relationships, their behavior and their identity. However, Saxton (1998) argues that even though through literature girls are taught to challenge previous notions of adolescent females, they still must read literature that presents messages, which underline those same deep-rooted ideas about adolescent females.^{xxx} This is especially important with contemporary young adult fiction because “Girls of twelve or so, the primary audience of these books, are in transition from child to adult. They are learning who they are, what they want to be, the rules of growing up—constructing their adult identity.”^{xxx}

Research Question

Do select contemporary young adult fiction novels suitably portray female adolescent identity development?

Methodology

Six contemporary young adult fiction novels were chosen for content analysis. The novels were chosen for their fit within the genre of young adult fiction and because the protagonists are girls. The selection of the novels was a result of investigation of frequently purchased books from major on-line bookstores, such as Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com, as well as informal inquiries I made to fellow colleagues currently

working in school libraries, or children/young adult sections of public libraries. Four of the titles in particular were suggested multiple times on-line, and a particular author that was suggested multiple times wrote the other two novels. The novels chosen to form the data set are as follows:

Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen (1999)
Second Helpings by Megan McCafferty (2003)
The Second Summer of the Sisterhood by Amy Brashares. (2003)
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Amy Brashares. (2001)
Sloppy Firsts by Megan McCafferty (2001)
The Truth About Forever by Sarah Dessen (2004)

To achieve the answer to my research question I used content analysis. According to Neuendorf (2002), content analysis is, “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics.”^{xxxiv} More specifically I used latent content analysis, whereby I looked for content, which is not physically present but rather is represented by certain indicators. Potter and Levine-Donnerstein would categorize the content I chose to analyze as “projective latent content,” since it, “focuses on coders’ [my] interpretations of the meanings of the content.”^{xxxv} For purposes of this research, the latent content was the identity development of female adolescents, and the indicators were the variables listed below. The six novels serve as the unit of analysis, and through coding the novels for different aspects of the process of identity development among female adolescents (variables), the content analysis provided a summary of the characteristics of the novels.^{xxxvi} The variables coded in the novels are as follows:

Character experiences feeling of not being listened to or responded to appropriately
 Character finds a disruptive or alternative way to be heard
 Character is self-critical
 Character experiences a loss of self or questions self

Character experiences separation from parents
 Character's peer group serves as a safe place
 Character questions 'What do others think of me?'
 Character is conflicted between 'opposites'

Findings:

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares is the first book of two about a group of four girlfriends. Carmen, Lena, Bridget and Tibby were destined to be friends since before they were born. Their mothers were all pregnant at the same time and in the same aerobics class, and the girls were all born within seventeen days of each other at the end of the summer. Now it is the summer before their junior year of high school and it will be the first they will spend apart. Carmen is going to her father's in South Carolina, Bridget is going to soccer camp in Baja California, Lena is going to her grandparents' in Greece, and Tibby is stuck at home (Maryland) working at Wallman's. Dreading their separation Carmen buys a pair of jeans from a thrift store and finds that the jeans fit each girl perfectly in their own way. Each girl has her own curves, or lack of curves, and height or lack thereof, and thus the pants seem magical. The girls decide that these jeans will be the Traveling Pants and will be the thread that keeps them together during their summer apart. Each girl will wear the pants and then pass them on to the next girl, with the promise of writing letters to one another, and at the end of the summer to write their summers on the pants. Over the course of the summer, the girls find the strength of their friendships as they wear the Pants, each with their own adventure and experience. At the end of the summer they meet and write down their summers on the pants before Carmen puts them away for the winter.

The Second Summer of the Sisterhood is the second book about Carmen, Lena, Bridget and Tibby. It is now the summer before their senior year of high school and they have eagerly waited to see what the magical Traveling Pants will bring them in the second summer. All school year long the pants remained unwashed (as part of the rules) in Carmen's closet. This summer no one has plans to travel except Tibby, who is going to film camp at a nearby college. Carmen's second summer with the Pants teaches her about love and understanding of the relationship with her mother. For Lena, the Pants teach her about the heartache of losing love. Bridget does end up traveling, to her estranged grandmother, where with the help of the Pants, she learns what home is. Being the only one with big plans, Tibby goes off to film camp. It is there that through her summer film project and the Pants, that Tibby learns to be true to herself and to those important to her life. As with the first summer of the Traveling Pants, at the end of the second summer the girls get together and write down their adventures on the Pants.

Sloppy Firsts is the first of two books by Megan McCafferty about Jessica Darling. At the beginning of the book it is the middle of Jessica's sophomore year of high school, her best friend of three and a half years has just moved away, and it is only days before her sixteenth birthday. During the year Jessica learns to go on with high school life without her best friend, how to deal with her not-really girl friends at school, put up with her dad's fascination with her track career, her mother and sister's obsession with her sister's wedding, and what to do with her weird feelings about Marcus Flutie, the druggie who morphs into an honors student.

Second Helpings picks up six months after the end of *Sloppy Firsts*, in the summer before Jessica's senior year of high school. She continues to struggle with her feelings about Marcus Flutie, and her so-called friends at school, but faces new challenges such as quitting track, dealing with her sister's pregnancy, and trying to decide on a college.

Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen is about a girl named Colie, who is spending the summer with her aunt Mira. Colie's mother is a weight loss motivational speaker, with her own line of weight loss products, and is traveling in Europe for the summer on tour. Colie finds herself working at a roadside grill at the beach, making friends with one of the cooks, Norman, who lives in the basement of her aunt's house, and the two waitresses, Isabel and Morgan, who also live next door to Aunt Mira.

The Truth About Forever by Sarah Dessen opens at the beginning of Macy's summer, as her boyfriend, Jason is leaving for Brain Camp and she prepares to take over his job at the information desk at the library. Living with her workaholic mother, Macy struggles with the distance between herself and her mother since her father's death. Over the summer Macy takes on another job catering, where she makes friends with Delia, Wes, Kristy, Bert and Monica.

	Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants	Second Summer of the Sisterhood	Sloppy Firsts	Second Helpings	Keeping the Moon	Truth About Forever
Feelings of not being listened to or responded to	√		√	√		√
Finds disruptive or alternative way to be heard	√	√	√			√
Self-critical	√	√		√	√	
Questions sense of self	√	√	√	√	√	√
Separation from parents	√	√	√	√	√	√
Peer groups serve as safe place	√	√	√	√		√
What do others think of me?	√	√	√	√	√	√
Conflicted between opposites	√	√	√	√		√

Four of the six novels contain female adolescents who experience feelings of not being listened to or responded to in an appropriate way.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen expects to spend the summer with only her dad, but instead finds that he has a new family, leaving her invisible.

Her dad was already most of the way up the stairs. . . Lydia pretended like she hadn't heard her. Even in the Pants she was invisible. And mute.

"I guess I just felt . . . invisible there," she answered slowly, thoughtfully. 'Nobody paid any attention to me. Nobody listened when I said I was unhappy or complained when I acted like a brat.'" (Brashares, pp. 179, 196, 197)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica does not feel like she can meet her dad's expectations when it comes to running, and after injuring herself (on purpose) finds her dad will not talk to her.

“Maybe if you had a better diet you wouldn't be so tired all the time,” my dad said, eyeing my bowl.

“Very subtle, Dad,” I said. I knew this would provoke him. For the past 168 hours he'd been either grunting at me or ignoring me altogether, and I couldn't take it anymore. (McCafferty, p. 99)

Then, after another injury that occurs while she has snuck out of the house at night to go running and clear her mind, Jessica's parents question her about what is going on; but she still does not feel that they are listening to what she has to say, even when she talks with her mom one-on-one.

I answered each question honestly, because it seemed to be the path of least resistance. But they weren't the answers my parents wanted to hear. (McCafferty, p. 177)

What always pissed me off about her whole *perspective* spill was that she was writing off my feelings at that moment. (McCafferty, p. 181)

In *Second Helpings* Jessica continues to feel that her family does not listen to what she has to say, especially when it comes to boys. Jessica just isn't interested in Scotty, the cute, sweet and available star athlete; her mother and sister just don't get it and pester Jessica about why she doesn't invite Scotty to the wedding.

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy struggles to keep up the façade of being “fine” for her mother. She tries to tell her mom about a bad dream she has about her father, but doesn’t feel like it gets her anywhere.

My *I’m fine* was poised on my lips, about to come automatically. But then, I stopped myself. I’m not fine, I thought. So instead I said, “No. I didn’t. I had bad dreams.”

“Really,” she said. “What about?”
 “Actually,” I said, “Dad.”

I was watching her carefully as I said this, saw her fingers, curled around the steering wheel, pulse white at the tips, then relax. I had that twinge in my stomach, like I was doing something wrong.

“Well,” she said finally, “it was only a dream.”
 And that was it. All this buildup to a great leap, and I didn’t fall or fly. Instead I found myself back on the edge of the cliff. . . . My mother was looking straight ahead, her eyes focused on the road. (Dessen, p. 269, 270)

Macy tells Delia that she just wants to talk to her mom about how much she misses her dad, but her mom does not want to talk about it.

“We all deal with things differently, Macy. Your mom is missing your dad in her own way, every day. Maybe you should ask her about it.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I can’t even bring him up. I tried this morning for the first time in ages, and she just shut down.” (Dessen, p. 284)

Four of the six novels have characters that behave or respond in a disruptive or alternative way in order to be heard.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen runs away from her dad's family after having blown up at them. When she returns home, she finds that he is neither out looking for her nor apparently concerned about her whereabouts.

Her heart was pounding as she made her way up the front steps, anticipating her father's face. Was he even there? Or out looking for her? . . . [S]he froze. She stopped breathing. The anger was growing again. . . . Her father wasn't looking for her. He wasn't calling the police. He was sitting at the dining room table. . . . She raced down the side steps and picked up two rocks, small and easy to grab. Motions were no longer connected to thoughts. . . . She heard the glass shatter and she saw it sail past the back of Paul's head and smack the far wall, before it came to sit on the floor at her father's feet. She stayed long enough for her father to look up and see her through the jagged hole in the window and know that it was her and that he saw her and that she saw him, and that they both knew. And then she ran. (Brashares, pp. 182, 183)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica is very different from her ultra-feminine sister Bethany, and this causes friction between Jessica and her mother. She tries going shopping with her mother because it's her mother's birthday, but Jessica explodes in anger, when her mother suggests they should have invited Bridget, the girl from across the street. This is the last straw for Jessica, who feels that her parents aren't concerned with who she really is.

"We should've invited her out with us," she said. "It would have been fun! Just like the old days . . ."

That was it. The end.

"You're right," I shouted, throwing my napkin on the table in disgust. "How could I have been so stupid. I should've rented Bridget out for your birthday! Rent-a-Daughter. So you wouldn't have to go through the torture of walking around with me."

"Keep your voice down!"

"I'm outta here!" I screamed.

The thing about making a dramatic exit is this: It helps when you have a way of getting beyond the parking lot. I hadn't thought to swipe my mom's keys, or grab my backpack so I could call a cab. I was stuck. I had to resort to sitting on a bench outside the entrance until my mom came out.

“Do you want to tell me what that was all about?”

“I . . . feel like you only want to be with me if I can be someone else, someone beautiful like Bethany or Bridget. And I feel like Dad only wants to be with me if I can be like the star athlete he wanted his son to be. It’s like when I try to be me, you’re not happy with who that person is. You’re constantly trying to talk me out of my feelings or make me feel bad for thinking differently than you do.”
(McCafferty, p. 238)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy has taken over her kind-of-boyfriend’s job at the library information desk. She doesn’t take the job as seriously as he does, nor as seriously as his two friends who work there. After several weeks of trying to do a good job and get along with the girls who work there, Macy has had it.

A moment passed, during which all I could hear was the silence of the library. The ticking of the clock. The slight squeak of Bethany’s chair. And after everything that had happened from the first day until the last five minutes, that was the last straw.

I turned around and looked at Bethany and Amanda, who were pretending to be huddled over some periodical while listening to every word we were saying. “Hey,” I called out, and they looked up, in tandem, like a creature with two heads. “You know, I think I’m going to go.”
A moment passed as this sunk in.
Amanda’s eyes widened. “But you don’t get off for another hour,” she said.
“Your shift,” Bethany added, “ends at one.”
“Well,” I said, picking up my purse. “Something tells me you’re not really going to miss me.”

This could be a big mistake, I thought, but it was already happening. I was not a girl with all the information, but I knew one thing. If this was my forever, I didn’t want to spend another second of it here.

So I picked up my purse and tossed it over the desk. It hit the carpet with a thud, right by Wes’s feet. Then, in a fashion my sister the rebel would have appreciated, I hoisted myself up, throwing one leg over, and jumped the counter, while Bethany and Amanda watched, stunned.

Four of the six novels have characters that are self-critical, either about their looks or their abilities.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Bridget and Lena are opposites. Bridget is the athletic type, while Lena is the more feminine character. Yet, they each are hypercritical of their appearances.

She wasn't beautiful. Not like Lena. There was no particular poetry or grace in her face. She knew that, and she knew that other people probably realized that too. [Bridget] (Brashares, pp. 30, 31)

She didn't like people having more reasons to look at her, to think that how she looked made them know her. [Lena] (Brashares, p. 50)

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Lena continues to be critical of her looks, and Carmen is critical of her legs.

Lena always downplayed her looks. . . . Her beauty made her feel self-conscious and exposed. It brought her the kind of attention she hated. (Brashares, p. 328)

If she had another Diet Coke, she would have to go to the bathroom right away and give him an opportunity to notice her short legs.

"Do you think he has short legs?" Carmen asked.

"What? No. What are you talking about?"

"Do you think *I* have short legs?" This was clearly the more tender question. (Brashares, pp. 37, 45)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica is also self-critical, as she constantly feels that her mother compares her to Bethany, her beautiful sister, especially when Bethany is the bride and hence the "belle of the ball," and Jessica is just a bridesmaid.

I wasn't sure about bee-yoo-ti-full, but I looked better than usual, which was a start. Despite its hideous cut and color, I didn't look so bad in my dress once the seamstress built in artificial boobage. (McCafferty, p. 129)

In *Second Helpings* Jessica continues to be self-critical, however, instead of being critical of her looks as in *Sloppy Firsts*, this time she is self-critical of her academic ability.

What made the admissions people believe that I belong here? Why didn't I choose cross-country camp instead? Oh, that's right. Because I suck." (McCafferty, p. 28)

All six of the novels have characters that experience a loss of self or question their sense of self.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen and Bridget question their own sense of self. Carmen questions who she is while she is at her father's house, away from her friends. Bridget feels a loss of herself after she has sex with an older guy.

She felt weirdly numb and invisible. It wasn't that she missed her friends; she was starting to wonder if she needed them around to feel like she existed at all.

If she were real and not invisible, if she could get a look at herself through the eyes of her friends or her mother, she might have been able to examine her feelings.

When Carmen went downstairs shortly before dinner that night, she was ready for a fight. She was wearing the Pants, which gave her a feeling of remembering herself again. [Carmen] (Brashares, pp. 99, 134, 135, 177, 178)

"Lena, Something happened. It isn't how I imagined. I need to talk to you but I can't say it here. I'm just. . . strange. I'm strange to myself.

Bee sprinted along in a torrent of activity, but once in a while something unexpected slammed her hard. It left Bee slow and uncertain. She fretted. She wasn't good at putting herself back together. [Bridget] (Brashares, 284, 285)

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Bridget and Tibby deal with wondering who they are, what has happened to the self they used to be.

If a person hadn't seen Bee in a year, they might not have recognized her sitting there. She wasn't blond and she wasn't thin and she wasn't moving. She had tried to dye her hair really dark.

"I may have lost her," Bee said solemnly.
 "Lost who?" Tibby asked, looking up from the mess.
 "Myself," Bee bounded one heel against a closed drawer.

"I think about the person I used to be and she seems so far away. She walked fast, I walk slow. She stayed up late and got up early. I sleep. I feel like if she gets any further away, I won't be connected to her at all anymore." [Bridget] (Brashares, pp.11, 12)

How had Tibby let herself get so far away? Where had she been? Her whole life since Bailey had died now seemed to her like the distant wanderings of an amnesiac, full of confusion and forgetting. [Tibby] (Brashares, p. 198)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica's best friend of three and a half years moves away. Without her best friend, Jessica begins to feel that she can't be who she really is.

Since my best friend moved away, I've censored my true feelings. . . . I've felt like I've lost my right to have an opinion. (McCafferty, p. 201)

In *Second Helpings* Jessica continues to question herself.

I don't know who the hell I am. I am definitely not the Jessica Darling I used to be. I mean, who is Jessica Darling if she doesn't run on the track team and doesn't write for the school paper anymore? Weren't those my defining traits? Who am I now without them? (McCafferty, p. 188)

In *Keeping the Moon* Colie is unsure of herself. She knows who she used to be, the fat girl, but now that she has lost weight, she's not so sure of herself. Only with the help of her two new friends, Isabel and Morgan, does she start to understand who she can be.

By the time we'd been in Charlotte for two years, my mother had lost a hundred and sixty pounds, with me shedding forty-five and a half right beside her.

She loved her new strong body, but for me it was harder. Even though I'd been teased all my life, I'd always taken a small strange comfort in my folds of fat.

I'd been a caterpillar for so long, and although I had shed my cocoon in losing my fat, my coat, and the years that led me here, I wasn't a butterfly yet.

And all the while I studied those perfect faces, one after another, until I came back to my own. And I saw a girl. Not a fat girl, a loser, or even a golf course slut. A pretty girl. Something I had never been before. (Dessen, pp. 5, 99, 147)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy begins to change from her "fine-just-fine" self to a happier person after meeting her friends at Wish Catering. However, after things go awry with her mom and Wes, she questions the changes in herself.

Maybe I should have noticed earlier, but I'd been distracted with my own problems. After what happened with Wes, though, I'd stopped resisting my punishment. It was weird how, with things pretty much done between us, I could so easily go back to the life I'd had before. I found myself forgetting the girl I'd become, who'd been, if not fearless, not as afraid. (Dessen, p. 317)

All six of the novels have characters that experience some type of separation from their parents, whether it is physical or emotional.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen, Bridget and Lena are all traveling away from home for the summer, and are away from their parents. Tibby is the only one staying home for the summer, and her separation from her parents is emotional rather than physical.

Tibby couldn't say exactly the day when her salt and pepper shakers disappeared, but she could date it generally. It happened not too long after her mom stopped being a sculptor and took a test to become a real estate agent.

Particularly on the nights her dad worked late, her mom expected Tibby to step in and be her coparent. Like Tibby had decided to have these kids with her. It was irritating.

"Were they young when they had you?" Bailey asked.

"Nineteen."

"You were kind of like their experiment," Bailey said.

"Then they got to be grown-ups and they wanted kids for real," Bailey speculated. Tibby was both amazed and discomfited by the way this conversation was going. What Bailey said was exactly true. When all her parents' friends had started having kids, her parents had seemed to want another chance to do it right. (Brashares, pp. 103, 142, 143)

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Tibby, Bridget and Lena all deal with some type of separation from their parents. Tibby heads off to camp at a college, Bridget leaves her dad's for her grandmother's in hopes of learning about her dead mother, and Lena can't get it right with her mom after asking about Eugene.

Just how excited was she to be shipping Tibby off to college? Did she have to be so obvious about it? . . . It was supposed to be that the kid was happy about leaving home and the parents were sad. Instead, Tibby was feeling sad. Her mother's happiness was forcing a role reversal. [Tibby] (Brashares, pp. 21, 22)

Bridget was deeply struck by this girl, but she didn't feel she knew her personally. This Marly didn't relate in any obvious way to the woman she had known as her mother. [Bridget] (Brashares, p. 110)

Now Lena was the one trying to get time with her mother instead of the other way around. . . . By now she'd realized that her mother was avoiding her. [Lena] (Brashares, p. 129)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica continually deals with her father trying to be there for every second of her running career, whether it's while she runs around the neighborhood following her on his bike, or while video-taping every mistake she makes at track meets. Jessica feels the need to separate from her father.

He sees these father-daughter jaunts as a way for us to bond, but I resent the interruption. (McCafferty, p. 54)

In *Keeping the Moon* Colie's mom is sending her to stay with an aunt during the summer, while she travels to Europe for a tour. Colie's separation from her mom is physical, and emotional as she wishes her mom would take her instead of leaving her behind.

Then take me with you, I thought, but she was already pulling back, wiping her eyes, and I knew if I said it the words would fall between us and just lie there, causing more trouble than they were worth. (Dessen, p. 3)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy is separated from her father who has passed away. She is separated from her mother who refuses to discuss Macy's father, has difficulty watching Macy change and become independent and happy again, and works almost round the clock.

“Are you okay?”

As I did every time she asked this, I wished I could answer her honestly. There was so much I wanted to tell my mother, like how much I missed my dad.

She walked down the hallway, still talking, as I just sat there, in the sudden quiet of the kitchen. Everyone else could get through to my mother: all they and to do was dial a number and wait for her to pick up. If only, I thought, it was that easy for me. (Dessen, pp. 48, 268)

Five of the six novels have characters who seek their peer groups as a safe place, whether for emotional support or as a place to express new ideas.

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen, Lena, Bridget and Tibby have been friends since they were born. The Pants are the thread that keeps them together during their first summer apart, along with the letters they send to each other. Each girl calls upon at least one of her friends at some point where she can find safety.

Carmen really cried. . . . Tibby put both arms around her, smelling and looking that comforting Tibby way, and Carmen was so relieved to be in a safe place with someone who knew her really, truly . . .

Bridget looked down at the Pants, grateful to have them. They mean support and they meant love, just as they'd all vowed at the beginning of the summer. But with Lena right here, right next to her, she almost didn't need them. (Brashares, pp. 195, 290)

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* the four girls continue their friendships, and they continue to pass around the Pants and send letters and instant messages. Bridget had changed over the last year, but it was her friends who kept her safe.

The only thing that had kept her in the world was the constant attention of Carmen, Lena, and Tibby. They would not let her be, and she loved them for it. (Brashares, p. 21)

In both *Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings* Jessica finds a safe place for expressing who she is and what is going on in her life through writing letters to her best friend, Hope, who has moved away. Hope has been her best friend for three and a half years, and Jessica is not about to let the other girls at school replace her.

I miss talking to you. Knowing that you get me. And every time I talk to someone else it just reminds me how much they don't. (McCafferty, p. 49)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy has a hard time dealing with other people when they find out that her dad is dead, so she doesn't like talking about it. And she's tired of having to be "fine-just-fine" for her mom, boyfriend and everyone else. However, when she meets Wes, whose mother is dead, she finds a friend in him, one that she feels safe with.

Wes and I were friends now. . . .

Initially, the only thing we shared, other than working for Wish, was that we both had lost a parent. This was a lot to have in common, but it wasn't just about that anymore, either. The truth was, since our night stranded together, I felt comfortable around Wes. When I was with him, I didn't have to be perfect, or even try for perfect. He already knows my secrets, the things I'd kept hidden from everyone else, so I could just be myself. (Dessen, p. 187)

All six of the novels have characters that are concerned with what other people think.

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Carmen worries about what Porter thinks about her and their first date, while Tibby worries about what her friends and mother think.

Did he have a great time? She wondered, musing at the closed door, or was he just saying that? Was his idea of a great time different from her idea of a great time? [Carmen] (Brashares, p. 44)

She wondered. Had she not brought Brian because she was worried about how he would seem to Alex and Maura? Or was it because she worried about how she, Tibby would seem to Brian?

She'd told Brian it was fine if her mom saw her movie, that she didn't care. But from the lurch and sprawl of her stomach, it was seeming like maybe she did care. [Tibby] (Brashares, pp.105, 172)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica is concerned about what other people think about her, especially when she is seen out on a Saturday night with the un-cool guy, Marcus Flutie.

Sara, Manda, Soctty, and Burke had just burst through the door on a gust of ice-cold air. This was my fault. I should have known they would come here on a Saturday night. There was no way Marcus and I would get out of this without being seen.

...
Why did I care? Did I care? How could I still care what the Clueless Crew and Co. thought? (McCafferty, p. 252)

In *Second Helpings* Jessica worries about what other people think about her; whether it's positive or negative, it doesn't matter. Jessica just wants to know that at least she isn't ignored.

I know this sounds insane, but I was kind of relieved that I wasn't totally overlooked, as it proves that I register a blip on the Pineville radar. As much as I don't care about those things, I think it's human nature to not want to feel totally insignificant. (McCafferty, p. 149)

In *Keeping the Moon* Colie worries about Caroline Dawes, and what other people at school think of her. She grew up fat, only recently losing forty-five pounds, so she didn't mind the fat jokes, but she still worries about what others think and say about her.

Caroline was talking loudly, loud enough for me to hear all the way across the restaurant. I knew Norman could hear her, too, could imagine what he was thinking . . .

I turned around, my eyes blurring as they adjusted to the shade. It was Isabel. She was standing on the other side of the door, arms crossed over her chest. And she was watching and listening to Caroline Dawes.

Oh, great, I thought. Now she can hate me for a reason.

It was happening again. No matter what I did, or how the world changed for me, all it took was Caroline Dawes to ruin everything. (Dessen, pp. 81, 82, 159)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy worries about what her mother and her boyfriend think about her. She doesn't feel that she can meet their standards for her. Macy also worries about what her new friends think of her, especially when they ask why her boyfriend dumped her.

For some reason, I was sure that Jason's breaking up with me would make me less than that in her eyes. It was bad enough that *I* assumed I wasn't up to Jason's standards. Even worse would be for her to think so.

It seemed wrong to be sitting here discussing this. Plus I was embarrassed enough by what had happened. . . . I could only imagine what these girls would think. (Dessen, pp. 82, 133)

Five of the six novels have characters that face "opposites."

In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Carmen deals with opposites when it comes to her feelings and about her space.

I love everything about this trip but being apart and knowing you're sad about being home. I don't feel right being happy knowing that.

She was sick of the guest room. Every piece of furniture was draped with clothes; the rest were on the floor. She was a hypocrite, she knew. She made messes but couldn't tolerate them. (Brashares, pp. 37, 144)

In *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Carmen deals with more opposites, but this time in relation to her mother.

Let's see. I want you to leave me alone, but not ignore me. I want you to miss me when I go away to college, but not be sad. . . I want to do the leaving, and not have you ever leave me. (Brashares, p. 283)

In *Sloppy Firsts* Jessica struggles with being sociable when she really doesn't like hanging out with her "friends" from school. She also deals with opposites when it comes to helping others versus herself, being happy versus being selfish and jealous, and keeping a secret versus being honest.

Despite my antisocial tendencies, I don't want to be the sophomore class pariah.

Hope not only got in to the private school, but nabbed a scholarship. Huge deal. I know that a true best friend would be happy for her. . . . I know I shouldn't be jealous because leaving Pineville may end up being the best thing that ever happened to Hope, . . . But I am.

The comparisons between getting my cast off and getting the secret off my chest are inevitable: one is physical emancipation, the other an emotional one. Both are painful, yet they leave me feeling free, clean, and ready to build myself up to be stronger. (McCafferty, pp. 13, 150, 205)

In *The Truth About Forever* Macy deals with being the perfect daughter and girlfriend for her mom and boyfriend. She is their opposite, and ends up being the carefree, happy girl when she caters and hangs out with her friends.

So while at home I was still fine-just-fine Macy, wiping up sink splatters immediately and ironing my clothes as soon as they got out of the dryer, the nights when I arrived home from catering, I was someone else, a girl with her hair mussed, a stained shirt. . . . It was like Cinderella in reverse: if I was a princess for daylight hours, at night I let myself and my composure go, just until the stroke of midnight, when I turned back to princess again, just in time.

So it was just a formality, what we'd just agreed on, a contract I'd signed without reading the fine print. But I knew what it said. That I could be imperfect, but only so much. Human, but only within limits. And honest, to her or to myself, never. (Dessen, pp. 105, 222)

Synopsis of Findings

The books in the data set do provide appropriate examples of identity development among female adolescents.

Some of the characters feel that they are not being listened to or heard or responded to appropriately. Carmen feels invisible in the middle of her dad's new family. Jessica feels that her dad ignores her when she injures herself and her running career, and that both of her parents don't really want to hear what she has to say when they ask her what's going on in her life. Macy doesn't find the response from her mom that she needs or wants when it comes to talking about her late father.

Some of the characters find disruptive or creative ways to be heard, or at least make themselves feel like they are heard. Carmen provides an excellent example of the adolescent reacting "creatively" and disruptively in order to be heard when she throws the rock in the window at her father's home and then runs away. Jessica is able to express herself to her mother only after having blown up in the middle of a restaurant and

making a grand departure. Macy gets tired of following the rules and doing what is right all the time, and so she makes a stand in regards to her boyfriend and her mother's expectations of her by quitting her library job, right in the middle of a shift, by jumping over the counter, rather than just walking out.

Some of the characters are self-critical. The girls criticize themselves for their looks, their abilities and their own personalities. Bridget criticizes herself for her looks, for how she really isn't pretty, that her hair is just a distraction, and for how other people see this. Lena is pretty, but criticizes herself for her good looks because everyone else notices her because of them, and because she doesn't like the attention she gets just because she is pretty. Carmen is self-critical of herself because she is half Puerto-Rican, thus she is different from her dad's new family, as well as most of her friends at home. She criticizes herself for her curvy figure, dark hair, and short legs. Jessica criticizes both her looks and her academic ability.

Some of the characters feel a sense of loss of self or question who they are. While Carmen questions if she can be herself at her Dad's home, away from her friends, Bridget becomes the adolescent female that loses her sense of self and identity after having sex with an older boy. Tibby as well shows signs of questioning her identity after Bailey's death and learning to be true to herself. Jessica is like Carmen, in that without her best friend Hope around, she is unsure of herself, and whether or not she can be who she is. Jessica also questions who she is after she quits the track team and the school paper. She knew who she used to be, but after things started to change, Jessica became unsure of

herself. Colie feels that she has lost herself. She is used to being the fat girl, the one that everyone makes fun of, the one that is left behind. But now that she has lost her weight, she is unsure of herself, and questions who she is now. Macy questions herself as to who she really is. On one side she is the perfect student, daughter and girlfriend, yet on the other side she is working towards being a little more carefree and happier. However, Macy questions her ability to do this and which side of her is really her true self.

Some of the girls experience separation from their parents. Tibby feels a separation from her parents in two ways. She is the oldest child, born during her parents teenage years before they were emotionally or financially ready to start a family. Now she feels separate from their “new” family, with their new careers and two new siblings. Secondly, Tibby expects to enjoy the physical separation from her parents when she travels to Williamston, but ends up learning the heartache of emotional separation when she hurts her mother’s feelings after the first film screening. Lena feels the loss of her mother during the second summer after she brings up Eugene, which causes her mother to distance herself from Lena. Carmen feels isolated from her dad when she learns of his new family, and then the next summer isolation from her mother when Christina starts dating David. Bridget deals with the loss of her mother, who has been dead for some time. Jessica finds herself separated from her father who wanted the star athlete after she injures herself running. Colie is physically separated from her mother for the summer, but also feels an emotional separation as she wishes her mother had taken her on the trip, and instead she settles for watching her mother on TV infomercials. Macy feels

separation from both her mother and her deceased father. In trying to deal with the loss of her father, Macy's mother pulls away emotionally, thus separating her from Macy.

Most of the characters seek out their respective peer groups, and therefore have a safe haven. Carmen, Lena, Bridget and Tibby seek each other in time of need, through letters, the Pants, instant messages and phone calls. Carmen reaches out for Tibby after running away from her dad's. Bridget is thankful when Lena flies out to Baja to bring her home from camp, as well as thankful for the rest of her friends who stick with her as she changes during the year. Jessica seeks a safe place for expressing herself by writing letters to her best friend, Hope, who she feels more safe with than the other girls at school. Macy, tired of the face people give her when they learn about her father, and tired of being fine-just-fine, eventually finds a friend in Wes, with whom she feels safe being herself.

Some of the characters are concerned with what others think Carmen worries about what her first date thinks of her. Tibby worries about what her film camp friends will think of Brian, and he of them, as well as what her mother will think of her film. Jessica worries about what people from school will think about her for talking and going out with Marcus Flutie, the one-time drug-using rebel. Colie worries about what other people think about her. Away from home for the summer she hopes the people she meets will form their own opinions about her, but after a visit from a girl back home, Colie worries that Caroline's words will taint her new friends' perceptions about her. Macy worries about how she appears to her mother and her boyfriend. Both have high

expectations of her, and while Macy doesn't want to let them down, she also wants to be true to herself, and thus worries about how that will affect their perceptions of her.

Several of the characters are faced with dealing with opposites. Carmen is conflicted with feeling excited about going away during the first summer versus feeling sad that she is leaving her friends behind, especially Tibby. During the second summer Carmen faces several opposites in dealing with her mother, while trying to establish her independence and yet still relying on her mother. Jessica faces being happy for her best friend versus being jealous because she won't get to visit with her best friend, and deals with keeping a secret from a friend (and thus not hurting her feelings) versus being honest, telling the truth (and thus hurting her friend's feelings). Macy struggles with the opposites of being the perfect daughter and girlfriend versus being happy with herself and unafraid to live.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings of the data set reviewed, it can be said that the processes of female adolescent identity development are accurately portrayed in this select set of contemporary young adult fiction titles. "This is where the value of young adult literature is most apparent: In the best of young adult novels that feature female protagonists, girls can see reflections of themselves. These reflections are not fixed, but moving and changing, and hopeful."^{xxxvii} Brashares has developed characters that are changing and hopeful for the future as they prepare to leave their childhoods behind and become women. By the end of Brashares' first novel, and certainly the second, it is

obvious that all four characters have grown, taken steps in developing their own identities and are closer to becoming women than they were at the beginning of each summer. McCafferty's novels present a female adolescent who begins to develop her identity, apart from her best friend. Jessica learns that her friendships with people (Marcus, Bridget, and Len) are not due to what everyone else thinks is cool, but rather because they are important to her. Jessica learns that she can be herself even if she isn't the star of the track team or writer for the school paper. Dessen's books each have characters that strive for their own identity. Colie, unsure of herself, leaves behind her cocoon of fat to become the beautiful butterfly as she works on developing her identity and who she will be. Macy uses the encouragement of and emotional outlet provided by her friends with Wish Catering to come into her own, to develop her identity separate from her perfect boyfriend, and her fine-just-fine mother. Thus these works exemplify the following:

"When the female protagonist is able to use the situational shift in order to help her grow, gain a sense of self or transform relationships, then she has demonstrated not only a successful rite of passage but also her own emerging strength."^{xxxviii}

Future Research

During the process of researching this topic I found less information than I expected on female adolescents, their identity development and their portrayal in young adult fiction. I found an abundance of research on all three aspects of male adolescents. "Like literary critics, historians have tended to ignore female experience and universalize the experience of boys."^{xxxix} "Psychology has a long history of ignoring girls this age. Until recently adolescent girls haven't been studied by academics, and they have long

baffled therapists.”^{xi} “Until the past decade there was relatively little research about girls and their own coming of age experiences. Most of the major studies focused on boys, based on an assumption that boys and girls have similar needs when it comes to achieving an identity and independence. More recently, however, the findings from psychology and women’s studies have revealed that girls have some different needs, pressures, and expectations.”^{xli} It would be beneficial to teachers, parents and students if there were more research on this topic. Future research should include the study of female adolescent identity, perhaps building on Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, and how the issue of identity, voice and sense of self is portrayed in young adult novels. And perhaps future research could offer suggestions for young adult fiction authors as to how to better represent the development of identity for adolescent females, thus offering accurate information for female adolescents themselves.

Notes

ⁱ Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, p.53

ⁱⁱ Brown, Lyn Mike and Carol Gilligan. *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, p.1

ⁱⁱⁱ Pipher, p. 53

^{iv} Dalsimer, Katherine. *Female Adolescence: Psychanalytic Reflections on Works of Literature*, p. 6

^v Pipher, p. 23

^{vi} Darling, Nancy, et al "Adolescence: Change and Continuity; Biological Change: Puberty,"

<http://inside.bard.edu/academic/specialproj/darling/adbio1.htm>

^{vii} MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia, "Adolescent development,"

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002003.htm>; Darling, et al; Pipher, p. 55

^{viii} MEDLINEplus; Darling, et al.

^{ix} Pipher, p. 59

^x Pipher p. 60

^{xi} Dalsimer, p. 5

^{xii} Pipher, p. 59; MEDLINEplus; Brown and Gilligan, p. 93

^{xiii} Pipher, p. 71; MEDLINEplus

^{xiv} American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology. "Normal Adolescent Development,"

<http://education.indiana.edu/cas/adol/development.html>

^{xv} MEDLINEplus

^{xvi} Sadowski, Michael, ed. *Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education*, p. 3, 16

^{xvii} Kroger, Jane, ed. *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance Between Self and Other*, 2nd ed., p.1; Sadowski, p. 86

^{xviii} Brown, Joanne and Nancy St. Clair. *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001*, p. 60; Sadowski, p. 1, 2, 7, 14, 15

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- ^{xix} McKinney, Caroline S. "Finding the Words that Fit: The Second Story for Females in Young Adult Literature," <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall96/f96-04-McKinney.html>
- ^{xx} Brown and Gilligan, p. 5
- ^{xxi} Brown and Gilligan, p. 43
- ^{xxii} Brown and Gilligan p. 2
- ^{xxiii} Pipher, p. 19
- ^{xxiv} Pipher p. 21, 22, 35, 36
- ^{xxv} Mazarella, Sharon R. and Norma Odom Pecora, ed. *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, p. 3, 214; Brown and Gilligan, p. 4, 32; McKinney
- ^{xxvi} Pipher, p. 22, 39, 20, 38
- ^{xxvii} Sadowski, p. 20; MEDLINEplus
- ^{xxviii} Pipher, p. 23, 24
- ^{xxix} McKinney; Pipher, p. 23, 67
- ^{xxx} MEDLINEplus
- ^{xxxi} Brown and St. Clair, p. 2; Mazarella and Pecora, p. 22
- ^{xxxii} Town, Caren J. *The New Southern Girl: Female Adolescence in the Works of 12 Women Authors*, p. 2; Saxton, Ruth O. *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*, p. xxi
- ^{xxxiii} Mazarella and Pecora, p. 50
- ^{xxxiv} Neuendorf, Kimberly A. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, p. 1
- ^{xxxv} Neuendorf, p. 139
- ^{xxxvi} Neuendorf, pp. 13, 15, 16, 23, 50, 51
- ^{xxxvii} McKinney
- ^{xxxviii} McKinney
- ^{xxxix} White, Barbara A. *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction*, p. 15
- ^{xl} Pipher, p. 21
- ^{xli} McKinney

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